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ABSTRACT

A fifteen-item Likert scale and indepth personal interviews were used to collect data in a study that examined whether five individuals who held both the role of editor and public official were perceived as able to perform in a socially responsible manner as editors of their community newspapers in their estimation and in the estimation of a purposive sample of their readers. The 80 subjects included the five community newspaper editors and fifteen people from each community. They represented a cross-section of readers: professionals, blue-collar workers, advertisers, news media representatives, and political opponents. Results indicated that the editors in each of the five communities perceived themselves as high in social responsibility; moreover, each editor rated himself higher in five social role categories than the readers rated him. This finding was expected since each editor admitted in interviews that the potential for role conflict existed and that each took steps to minimize role conflict.(HOD)

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THE EDITOR AND PUBLISHER AS PUBLIC OFFICIAL: THE ULTIMATE CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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THE EDITOR AND PUBLISHER AS PUBLIC OFFICIAL: THE ULTIMATE CONFLICT OF INTEREST?

I. Introduction

Today, more than one hundred newspaper editors and publishers serve in public office, or at some point in their lives, have served as editors and public officials simultaneously.[1] To date, however, little systematic study of the editor as public official has been done. The lone published report from journalism literature which addresses the subject directly appeared twenty-five years ago when U.S. Sen. Paul Simon (D.-Ill.), who was then serving his third term in the Illinois General Assembly and was owner of a group of newspapers, strongly supported the idea that public officials should own newspapers.[2]

However, research has shown that role conflict can develop in situations where an individual tries to occupy two roles simultaneously.[3] The most pertinent study involves occupational role strain experienced by elected officials who also occupy the role of businessmen in which it is reported that the fact that most politicians serve in more than one role as elective public officials guarantees conflict in performance.[4]

The question addressed in this paper is whether five individuals who hold both the role of editor and public officials are perceived as able to perform in a socially responsible manner as editors of their

community newspapers in their estimation and in the estimation of a purposive sample of their readers. To help answer that question, role theory was selected as a theoretical framework. The assumptions are that the social roles people occupy, the reference groups they identify with and whose norms, loyalties, and values they adopt, the role expectations that others hold for a given role, the intensity with which the role is carried out, and the affect on behavior contradictory expectations bring on in the form of role conflict, or conflict of interest, will all be important in determining whether an editor who is also a public official is perceived as performing in a socially responsible manner.[5]

Social responsibility theory is silent on the subject of whether journalists should seek or hold public office, but the theory does set forth the notions that the news media are to serve as surrogates for the public and to act as watchdogs, checking on and criticizing the actions of public officials when necessary.[6] The notion of the press as a fourth branch of government—a Fourth Estate—was espoused by Cater,[7] and as long ago as 1644, when the Areopagitica was first published, John Milton argued that everyone should be free to express himself although he cautioned that for truth to survive government should keep out of the battle and not weight the odds in favor of one side or the other.[8]

However, history has shown that politically-motivated men have sometimes become editors and publishers.[9] Still, no enforceable mandate exists which says the press must perform in a socially responsible way, and no constitutional prohibition exists against

a public official owning a newspaper. This has allowed a growing number of newspapers to be owned and edited by public officials who may have limited formal education in journalism, little or no exposure to social responsibility theory, and little or no background in journalism ethics. What can result is a potential clash between the politician's instinct for survival and the journalistic ideal of editorial autonomy.

II. Method

A case study method was chosen as the most appropriate research technique because the study is exploratory with no generalizations to be drawn from the cases to the larger population. Such an approach does not mean that case study and statistical methods are mutually exclusive. Quite the contrary, this study employed quantitative and qualitative dimensions—a questionnaire with statistical analysis and in-depth personal interviews. The study sought to measure whether editors are perceived as performing in a socially responsible manner through the use of a fifteen-item Likert scale whose statements are underlain by the postulates of role theory and the tenets of social responsibility theory, and also through personal interviews with editors and their readers. Responses on the research instrument were recorded on a five-point scale ranging from "strongly agree" to "strongly disagree" (see Figure 1).

The eighty subjects in the study included five community newspaper editors and fifteen people from each of five social role categories (as discussed below, interviewees in the five categories were identified by social or occupational roles).

In selecting the purposive sample of five editors, only current local and state officials were considered because it was expected that those editors would perhaps have an active hand in the day-to-day editorial operations of their newspapers. The names of the editors, their office or offices, names of newspapers, and cities are:

MARVIN PROFFER, state representative, Cash-Book Journal, Jackson, Missouri.

RAYMOND CLARKE, city councilman, high school principal, Cullman Tribune, Cullman, Alabama.

DANIEL MILES SR., mayor, Clinton Eye, Clinton, Missouri.

RODNEY BRENNER, sheriff, community college board of trustees chairman, Herald-Enterprise, Golconda, Illinois.

MAHLON WHITE, city councilman, school board member, Benton County Enterprise, Warsaw, Missouri.

The purposive sample of readers was selected on the basis of their occupancy of one of five occupational or social roles which result in their having interaction with the newspaper as readers, or with the editor as a member of the editor's reference groups. The five role categories were selected on the basis of the fact that they might hold different role expectations, have different affiliations to reference groups, and would be different in social position. Such differences might help predict differences in perception of the editor's performance and role conflict he might experience. Three persons were selected in each of the five categories from each of the communities, with a total of fifteen providing a rough cross-section of readers who have various levels of interaction with the editor and his newspaper. The role categories are: professional, blue-collar worker, advertiser, news media representative, and political opponent.

Each interview with an editor consisted of administering the standardized instrument and asking follow-up questions based on the responses. Editors were also asked to recommend readers in the community who would fit the five role categories (e.g., "Name your major advertiser . . ." "Who was your opponent in the last election?"). Interviews with readers consisted of administering the standardized instrument and asking follow-up questions based on responses to the questionnaire. Statements which comprise the research instrument represent efforts to operationalize measurement of the degree to which the editors who are also public officials are perceived (or perceived themselves) as exercising their "watchdog" and journalistic surrogate roles and to what extent they promote a "marketplace of ideas" approach.[10] Other statements measure perceptions of role conflict when the editor is presented with hypothetical situations which test his loyalty to a reference group or allegiance to his readers.

Analysis of responses to the questionnaire results in an editor being perceived as either high or low in social responsibility. Composite scores were arrived at by taking the sum of the fifteen Likert-scale items, and then computing a mean score for the editor and each of the five social role categories. On the Likert scale, mean scores of 1.0-2.99 indicate that an editor is perceived as performing in a socially responsible manner, and mean scores of 3.01-5.0 indicate that an editor is perceived as not performing in a socially responsible manner. High social responsibility is indicated by lower scores, while low social responsibility is indicated by higher scores.

III. Results

Case studies in Jackson, Missouri, and in Cullman, Alabama, show the most striking differences in perceived social responsibility, while the other cases fall on a continuum of social responsibility between Jackson where the editor is perceived to be the highest in social responsibility to Cullman where the editor is perceived lowest in social responsibility.

All five social role categories in Jackson perceived the editor as high in social responsibility, the only community among the five with such a rating. On the other hand, all five categories in Cullman perceived the editor as low in social responsibility, the only community among the five with such a rating (see composite scores of editors and the five social role categories in Table 1).

Editors in each of the five communities perceived themselves as high in social responsibility, and in each of the five communities the editor perceived himself as higher in social responsibility than do readers in the five social role categories. This finding was expected since each editor admitted in interviews that the potential for role conflict existed and that each took steps to minimize role conflict. Role theory suggests that the role category of political opponent would perceive the editor as lowest in social responsibility, a finding that was borne out in four of the five cases. The only exception was in Cullman where blue-collar workers (3.85) and political opponents (3.84) virtually tied in perceiving the editor as low in social responsibility. The news media representative role category also generally perceived that editors were low in social

responsibility (3.04). That finding was expected since the news media should have an understanding of the "watchdog" function of the press and the "marketplace of ideas" concept and should be aware whether those functions were carried out by the editors.

Professionals perceived that the editors were highest in social responsibility (2.71). This finding was also expected since role theory suggests that in a small town where only a small nucleus of leaders exists, professionals would be included among those leaders and would likely be members of many of the same reference groups as the editor. Both blue-collar workers (2.85) and advertisers (2.90) gave the editors a generally high social responsibility rating. However, in two of the communities—Golconda, Illinois and Cullman, Alabama—advertisers and blue-collar workers perceived that the editors were low in social responsibility. It was expected that advertisers might be more critical of the editor's performance since the advertiser, even though he is a member of the business community and is probably a member of several reference groups to which the editor belongs, depends upon all segments of the community for business support and would therefore have a special interest in the newspaper's image. Also, blue-collar workers would not generally be considered members of the editor's primary reference groups and would likely hold differing role expectations than the editors.

IV. Discussion

The study shows that some editors manage to occupy two or more seemingly incompatible roles with a minimum of role conflict, while other editors experience role conflict to such an extent that their

effectiveness as editors is impeded by problems engendered by occupancy of two roles.

Several reasons emerge to help explain how some editors manage to create a perception that they are performing in a socially responsible manner. Those reasons, taken from personal interviews with editors, include:

—They avoid role conflict by dispensing with the exercise of the "watchdog" function of the press.

—They do not mix fact and opinion in news stories, and if they write an opinion column, they avoid local issues.

—They leave an unmistakable impression that they are engaged in public service for the common good rather than for personal or political gain.

—Their political ambitions are generally limited to the public office they hold.

Or, in the words of a reader of the Cash-Book Journal, whose editor Marvin Proffer is a state representative: "Marvin doesn't use his paper as a pulpit."[11]

Reasons why editors were perceived as low in social responsibility (gleaned from personal interviews with readers) include:

—They place too much emphasis in their newspapers on themselves and the public office they hold.

—Their writing is often politically charged and deals with controversial local issues.

—They are perceived as opinionated and not amenable to presenting both sides to an issue in their newspapers.

—They are viewed as writing for political constituents and for members of their reference groups instead of for their general readership.

—Their political ambitions may lie beyond the present office they hold.

A political opponent of Cullman Tribune editor Raymond Clarke may have best summed up the perception of the editor-councilman-high school principal: "How can you put a fox in to guard the hen house? Raymond Clarke, as an editor, isn't interested in printing the news in such a way that it would have a stimulating effect on the community." In commenting on Clarke's turning the "watchdog" function of the press toward the other news media in town rather than toward local government, the same political opponent said: "Who appointed him as a watchdog for the news media? I'm glad the other news media are watching him. He's sincere all right. He's sincere in making himself and the city council look good. I don't doubt his sincerity. Hitler was sincere."[12]

An explanation behind the behavior of these editors isn't simple. Role theory alone may be but one dimension of the explanation. A more complete explanation could involve explorations into personality theory. Getzels and Guba[13] have reported in a study of role conflict that the basic premise of their research "is that the degree of strain or trouble engendered by an actor by role conflict will vary systematically as a function of certain identifiable personality variables." Indeed, personal traits and demographic attributes such as writing talent, wit, age, ambition, aggressiveness, passiveness, experience, and other variables may be additional factors tied to personality theory which could further help

explain the behavior of editors who are also public officials. In addition, the factors of having been born and raised in a community and distance the public office the editor holds is located from his newspaper office may be important variables in explaining why some editors are perceived as high in social responsibility, while others are not.

Furthermore, the study points to an inadequacy or loophole in the social responsibility theory. While the theory has its critics in Merrill[14] and Altschull,[15] it should not be abandoned but rather redefined to include special cases such as those in which editors serve simultaneously as public officials. While the author of the social responsibility theory of the press—the Commission on Freedom of the Press[16]—renewed emphasis on the need for continued economic self-sufficiency to keep the press free from government interloping, and also expressed concern for the press whose ownership had come to be concentrated in the hands of a relative few, there's little doubt that the theory's authors would have expressed concern over ownership of newspapers falling into the hands of public officials were such a scenario envisioned.

Today, even Theodore Peterson, the author of the social responsibility chapter in Four Theories of the Press, acknowledges that the theory is continuing to evolve and that it is up both to the press and to society to shape the end product.[17] Thus, should our pluralistic society tolerate and even encourage editors to seek and hold public office? Perhaps the answer is that we should do both—tolerate diverse thoughts and encourage freedom of expression—but to remain vigilant and to sound an alarm when we perceive that the editor's occupany of a public official role adversely affects his role as an editor. After all, each of the editors in these

case studies said it was his intent to put the community's best foot forward, but there is a fine line of distinction between the editor putting his community's best foot forward and putting his best foot forward. Whether social responsibility theory evolves into an amorphous, or even a vacuous term, or instead becomes a beacon to use in defining and interpreting press responsibility depends on society's vigilance. It depends on insisting upon and perpetuating every person's right to freedom of expression while retaining the right to criticize the public acts of public individuals who choose to express themselves through owning and editing newspapers.

NOTES

1. Survey of thirty-five state and national press associations, Spring 1984, conducted by Don Sneed (mail survey).

2. Paul Simon, "Should Editors of Weekly Newspapers Take Official Positions of Leadership?" Grassroots Editor 1-2 (April 1960), p. 6.

3. Waldo Burchard, "Role Conflicts of military chaplains," American Sociological Review 19 (October 1954), pp. 528-35. See also, Walter I. Wardell, "A Marginal Professional Role: The Chiropractor," Social Forces 3C (March 1952), pp. 339-48; Bryan R. Wilson, "The Pentecostal Minister: Role Conflicts and Status Contradictions," American Journal of Sociology 64 (March 1959), pp. 494-504; Donald F. Wray, "Marginal Men of Industry: The Foremen," American Journal of Sociology 54 (January 1949), pp. 298-301.

4. William C. Mitchell, "Occupational Role Strains: The American Public Official," Adadministrative Science Quarterly 3 (September 1958), pp. 210-28.

5. Bruce J. Biddle, Role Theory: Expectations, Identities and Behaviors (New York: Academic Press), 1979.

6. Theodore Peterson, Wilbur Schramm and Fred Siebert, Four Theories of the Press (Urbana: University of Illinois Press), 1956.

7. Douglass Cater, The Fourth Branch of Government (New York: Vintage Books, 1959).

8. Ibid., p. 45.

9. E.g., the case has been studied of an outspoken North Carolina editor during the Civil War who opposed the war effort, organized an opposition political party, and ran for governor, Donald L. Shaw and Stephen W. Brauer, "Press Reedom and War Constraints: Case Testing Siebert's Proposition II," Journalism Quarterly 46 (Summer 1969): 243-54. See also, Andrew R. Kraus, "Editors Who Ran for President," Media History Digest 1 (1980), pp. 8-16. Editors who ran for president of the United States include Warren G. Harding, editor of the Marion, Ohio, Mirror, who won the presidency; Robert LaFollette, editor of LaFollette's Magazine, who won the Progressive Party presidential nomination in 1924 and won nearly five million votes in his loss to Republican Calvin Coolidge; Horace Greeley, who was the Whig Party nominee for president in 1872 when he was one of the country's best-known citizens as a result of his work as editor of the New York Tribune; Liberty Party candidate James Birney who published an anti-slavery newspaper and ran for president in 1840 and 1844; and Henry A. Wallace, who edited Wallace's Farmer and New Republic magazines and became Franklin D. Roosevelt's vice president in 1940 and ran for president against Harry S. Truman.

10. Op. cit., Peterson, p. 44.

11. Interview with a professional in Jackson, Missouri, May 11, 1984.

12. Interview with Cullman, Alabama, mayoral candidate Rick Henry, March 9, 1984.

13. J.W. Getzels and Egon C. Guba, "Role Conflict and Personality," Journal of Personality 24 (September 1955), pp. 74-85.

14. John C. Merrill, Existential Journalism (New York: Hastings House), 1977.

15. Herbert J. Altschull, Agents of Power: The Role of the News Media in Human Affairs (New York: Longman), 1984.

16. Commission on Freedom of the Press, A Free and Responsible Press (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 1947.

17. Op. cit., Peterson.

TABLE 1

EDITOR SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY: COMPOSITE SCORES OF CASE STUDIES

(based upon scoring of fifteen Likert items)

	Pub.	Prof.	Blue-col.	Adv.	News med.	Pol. opp.
Jackson	2.06	2.39	2.26	2.18	2.65	2.86
Warsaw	1.93	1.95	2.52	2.65	2.63	3.19
Clinton	2.20	2.72	2.60	2.81	2.83	3.02
Golconda	2.00	2.79	3.03	3.31	3.29	3.42
Cullman	2.53	3.74	3.85	3.55	3.81	3.84
COMPOSITE SCORES	2.14 (n=5)	2.71 (n=15)	2.85 (n=15)	2.90 (n=15)	3.04 (n=15)	3.26 (n=15)

Note: High social responsibility is indicated by lower scores, while low social responsibility is indicated by higher scores. Mean scores of 1.0-2.99 indicate the editor is perceived as performing in a socially responsible manner, and mean scores of 3.01-5.0 indicate that the editor is perceived as not performing in a socially responsible manner.

FIGURE 1

QUESTIONNAIRE

DIRECTIONS: Please circle only one number per statement.	STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE
1. My community newspaper serves as the public's watchdog over local government.	1	2	3	4	5
2. It is a good idea for public officials at all levels--local, state, and national--to own and edit their own newspapers.	5	4	3	2	1
3. My community newspaper is sometimes critical of the actions of local public officials and local government.	1	2	3	4	5
4. The editor of my community newspaper would not publish a story unfavorable to an advertiser if the advertiser asked that the story not be published.	5	4	3	2	1
5. When there are opposing positions on issues, my community newspaper generally does a good job of presenting both sides.	1	2	3	4	5
6. My community newspaper sometimes places too much emphasis on the public office the editor holds.	5	4		2	1
7. My community newspaper reports news that is critical of or unfavorable to the community's major industry.	1	2	3	4	5
8. My community newspaper is used at times to advance the political views of its editor with regard to his public office.	5	4	3	2	1

STATEMENTS	STRONGLY AGREES	AGREE	NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREES
9. My community newspaper presents a fair and balanced account of political races in which the editor is a candidate for public office.	1	2	3	4	5
10. My community newspaper often fails to report on controversial local issues.	5	4	3	2	1
11. Owning a community newspaper and serving as its editor can be a problem for a person who also holds public office by creating conflicts brought on in holding both jobs.	1	2	3	4	5
12. My community newspaper sometimes gets involved in issues that are best left to public officials to decide.	5	4	3	2	1
13. The fact that the editor holds public office can affect the prominence or position a story about that office receives in my community newspaper.	5	4	3	2	1
14. The editor of my community newspaper writes more for his political constituents than for his readers.	5	4	3	2	1
15. The editor of my community newspaper is performing well in his role as editor even though there may be conflicts brought on by his serving as a public official	1	2	3	4	5